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Belonging in the Silence: Prayer

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Matthew 6:7-13

Lent has begun, and if this is the season of reflection on the state of our souls and our hearts and minds and bodies – and the shape of the world, then we are in the right place at the right time. In fact, we seem to have been stranded in this season for a long time.

Two years ago, today, was the last time we gathered in person for worship, unmasked and unhindered in any way, before the pandemic descended and scattered us into isolation from which we have not yet fully returned – although it is wonderful finally to see children again inside Westminster for the first time since March 8, 2020.

Jesus found himself in the wilderness for forty days; we've been in it for 24 months, and with the events of the last

week and a half it appears the harsh realities are not going away soon. One crisis receded and another begins to emerge. The horrific and unprovoked violence by Russia against the people of Ukraine and the massive flow of refugees and displaced persons beg a response from the rest of the world.

Connecting with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) is one way to respond to the unfolding consequences of war. To learn more about PDA or contribute to their work in Ukraine you will find a link to the work on the Westminster website. And this evening at 7:00pm we are invited to the Basilica of St. Mary for an Ecumenical Prayer Service for Peace in Ukraine. The service will also be livestreamed from the Basilica.

It is Lent – a time for quiet reflection on where we have gone astray, and how to find our way back home. As the church usually tells it, Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness were mostly spent grappling with the

temptations he faced. But there were only three of them, and he dispensed with them rather quickly. The heart of the experience for Jesus must have been all that silence. No one to speak with. No one to share in prayer or song. Stillness all around. He was utterly alone, and yet he discovered in the silence that he belonged to God.

In our world it is hard to think of finding such silence. Our cities and homes are suffused with technology and sound, not all of it unpleasant. Think of Kyiv with the unending noise: sirens and missiles, gunfire and explosions, cries of anguish and anxiety. Noise all around.

All of that is missing for Jesus in the Judean wilderness. Lent reminds us that we belong in the silence as much as we do in the world of sound, encased, as we can become, in the incessant clatter of our connectedness. We need more stillness in our lives, and this season offers it.

ent invites us to sample the silence, to go into the quiet of the desert in which Jesus lived for 40 days, and in the

quiet, explore practices of our faith. Our worship in this season will feature five Christian disciplines: prayer, study, self-examination, focus, and letting go. The intent is not for this to be on Sundays only. In fact, the Sundays in Lent are not even counted in the 40 days – they are seen as “little Easters.”

Lent is about the daily lives of those following Jesus. After Sunday, what are we doing the other six days of the week? Can we take these practices into each day, where they belong? We might find ourselves taking them with us past this season.

We begin today with prayer, a basic practice of any religion. Prayer is not unique to Christianity. Every religious tradition incorporates prayer or meditation or some way to access the divine. Even those of no faith at all utter a kind of prayer in their cry for help when suddenly in trouble – going beyond ourselves for assistance.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his followers to pray. “Whenever you pray,” he begins, “Go into your room and shut the door.”

That may sound like good advice, and we may even do it ourselves – we do value our privacy – but in the gospels, Jesus doesn’t do that. He goes to the garden to pray, up the mountain, down to the sea, into the desert to pray.

Jesus instructs us to go into our rooms and close the door not because a room closed off from the world is the best place to pray, but because it’s a good way to avoid the temptation to show how exceptional our prayer life is, to others. Praying is not a competition. That’s why Jesus points to the very public efforts of the hypocrites as what not to do in prayer. We don’t pray to hear ourselves pray. We’re not praying to make a point. We’re not praying to offer a short sermon.

Nothing sets Jesus off quite like inauthentic religiosity – being religious for its own sake. The hypocrites are not praying, they’re braying.

So Jesus goes outside to get away from it all – to a quiet place where the beauty of creation encourages his prayer.

“The happiest person,” Ralph Waldo Emerson says, “Is the one who learns from nature the lesson of worship.”

<https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/nature.html>

Jesus understands that. He prefers to practice his prayer outdoors, where “the lesson of worship” is most readily learned – from the wind and rain, the earth, sky, and creatures. All of us have experienced that – stood among the trees and listened to the forest, or marveled at the night’s scattered stars, or wondered at the splendor of the earth blanketed with newly fallen, sticky snow, and felt a shudder of something sacred. That is the gateway to prayer.

By the way he prays, Jesus is urging us to take hold of those moments, to let creation open us to the holy. He is affirming that our experience in the wild, or in the park or garden or front porch, puts us in the right posture toward the Creator and prepares us to pray.

Ten days ago we spent a day walking six miles along the rim of the Grand Canyon. The power of the enormous beauty of that place is with me still. A month before that we spent two weeks in a remote adobe retreat in the desert southwest. We were struck in these places by what French philosopher Gaston Bachelard called “intimate immensity.”

[\(https://www.interliamag.org/imagining-possibilities/on-the-dialectics-of-outside-and-inside-and-intimate-immensity/\)](https://www.interliamag.org/imagining-possibilities/on-the-dialectics-of-outside-and-inside-and-intimate-immensity/)

Intimate immensity - the realization that your own particularity, your own humanity, your body, is in the presence of something vast and universal. To be in such a place – and it needn’t be a national park or a faraway place, it can be anywhere – to be in such a place, aware of the smallness and the grandeur, is to be ready to pray.

Prayer takes us from the “here” of our finite life to the “there” of the infinite Being we call God.

That’s the paradox of prayer. It’s rooted in the temporal and down-to-earth; whatever we are carrying about ourselves and the world – and we carry so much these days – we bring to prayer. The stuff of reality. And, yet, to pray is to reach for the transcendent and aspire for what might be. In the midst of whatever danger we face or fear we know, sorrow or suffering through which we are passing, prayer offers us hope that there is more than what we see, more than merely the quotidian reality of our lives.

Jesus wants his followers to encounter the intimate immensity of the God we worship and serve, so he teaches us to pray. “Pray...in this way,” he says. “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

The first point in the lesson is quite simple: address the prayer to God – however we might name God – Father, Mother, Heavenly Parent, Holy One, Sacred Spirit. In prayer we attend to the presence of God. Sometimes that means speaking; at other times it means receiving. Praying is as much about listening as it is speaking. It is a folding of the specifics of our life into the comprehensive love of God.

Sadly, much of our prayer becomes merely an expression of our own desires – a wishing in the vague direction of God. Prayer is more serious than that. When we pray we enter sacred space. It can be brief; but should not be casual.

The second lesson on prayer from Jesus is this: once our prayer has begun, we should immediately acknowledge that we have entered holy space: Hallowed by thy name. We should remove our shoes when we pray, like Moses standing before the burning bush.

We often hear someone say, “You’re in my thoughts and prayers.” Or, “I’ll keep you in my prayers.” Maybe we say it. That’s fine. I know I say it. Those are good, supportive words to offer. But when those words cross our lips we should go straight to the praying place, even if only for a moment – genuinely, to pray for the person or the situation.

Jesus seems to have done his praying in the evening, often spending much of the night in prayer outside. It helps to build regularity into our prayer, so it becomes part of the rhythm of our life. I’m a morning pray-er. My first prayer of the day is offered outside our front door, no matter the weather – after all, I assure myself on a sub-zero day, this is the day the Lord has made. We rejoice and are glad in it.

It may seem like a little thing but finding a time and a place for our prayer helps us develop the discipline of attending to God. No multi-tasking here. Set aside a short

time where there are no distractions. Maybe we pray in a particular chair, or while walking a path in a park, or at the kitchen table. Maybe it's a brief waking prayer for use each day in Lent. Say it aloud if you can. Memorize it. It may be the first thing you say that day. Repeat it if that helps. Carry it within.

Prayer does not need to be long or full of rhetorical flourishes; in fact, Jesus warned against that. Look how short and simple the Lord's Prayer is. It's a good place to start because it puts us in the right posture toward the creator: Our Heavenly Parent, your name is holy. Your reign on earth will come and your will shall be done, as it is in heaven.

Right after Jesus says that God's will shall be done, he teaches us to name our need on earth. That's the third lesson on prayer that Jesus offers. Prayer is not a spiritualized encounter with a distant God. Jesus says we should bring our earthly needs to God, our required daily bread. It may be, literally, the bread we need each day. Or

it may be something else. God wants us to bring that which we bear in our hearts and minds and bodies. I can only imagine the prayers being lifted from the subways and train stations of Kyiv, on the roads in crowded cars, from the muffled weeping of mothers sheltering their infants as bombs rain down.

Prayer is an act of solidarity. By opening up to God we give testimony that we belong to God. Our prayers today for Ukraine and its beleaguered citizens are a sign of solidarity with them.

In his instruction, Jesus teaches us to pray for justice. We may not notice that in this prayer, but when Jesus says, “Pray like this, ‘Forgive us our debt, as we forgive our debtors,’” he’s instructing us to pray for justice.

This line is often rendered as “sins” or “trespasses,” both of which miss the point of the original language here. This is a Jubilee prayer, a prayer for a change in social and economic relations, a prayer calling for an inbreaking of justice in the human community, a time when people would be freed from financial bonds, or free others from financial bonds, a time when enslaved people would be released from captivity, and prisoners allowed to return home. The word debt has literal and specific economic meaning. Being forgiven of it and forgiving others of it are acts of justice.

Prayer, as Jesus teaches it, resists the ways in which the world violates God’s hope for humankind. So, this day as we pray for peace, that is a way to resist the violence in

Ukraine, for those fleeing for their lives, and for those working to provide assistance.

And we pray for those places in our own lives – and each of us has those places – where we need the forgiveness and comfort and love of God.

In this season of Lent, we do not have to look far to find reason for prayer. Having taught us to pray, Jesus invites us to join him in the silence of the wilderness. And so we do, throughout this season, grateful for the invitation.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.